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ABSTRACT

In 1988 West Virginia University established a task force to evaluate possible strategies for a statewide dropout prevention program. An emerging focus of the task force is the creation of similar task forces at the local level that would make dropout prevention a community responsibility and build community partnerships to provide a comprehensive approach to the problem. Community task forces would be organized by county extension agents and would include parents and representatives of the school system, community agencies, voluntary organizations, and local businesses. A statewide survey assessing current dropout prevention policies and practices was completed by 45 of West Virginia's 55 county school systems. Eleven specific measures deemed to be representative of a comprehensive dropout prevention program were routinely undertaken in 62% of elementary schools (n=27) and in 91% of high schools (n=33). Staff development activities related to dropout prevention were reported by 44% of counties, and prevention activities by community organizations were reported by 53%. Dropout activities were assessed as effective or very effective by 44% of counties. The most frequently mentioned factor that could improve the dropout situation was additional counselors, particularly at the elementary level. Respondents identified 43 exemplary programs related to dropout prevention, which will be incorporated into a resource guide. These programs frequently demonstrate the connection between school skills and life skills. (SV)

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Building Partnerships Towards Dropout Prevention

A Case Study of the West Virginia University School Dropout Prevention Task Force

Introduction

This paper is based upon the serious attempt of a state land-grant university to address the problem of school dropouts. During the fall of 1988, West Virginia University (WVU) created a School Dropout Prevention Task Force with the specific charge of determining the most promising opportunities for the university to address the dropout problem on a statewide basis. The activities and outcomes of this task force should be of particular relevance to symposium participants since 64 percent of West Virginia's population lives in rural areas, making it the second most rural state in the nation.

Description of the West Virginia Project

School dropout prevention has been targeted by West Virginia University officials as a major new public service initiative for the 1990's. This reflects the view that education is critical to the state's economic future and that this future is compromised whenever a student fails to complete his or her education.

The task force consists of 11 members representing the WVU Extension Service, the College of Human Resources and Education, and the West Virginia Department of Education. The initial effort of the task force was directed toward analyzing the scope and nature of the school dropout issue, its causes, and possible remedies. This included numerous meetings with resource persons involved in dropout prevention plus a statewide survey of West Virginia county school systems. The object of this survey was to determine the scope and nature of dropout prevention activities and to identify any exemplary programs that could serve as models for other school systems. Descriptions of these exemplary programs are being incorporated into a resource guide that is currently being developed by the task force.

This paper will start with a discussion of an emerging focus of the task force - building partnerships towards dropout prevention between schools, parents, community groups and businesses. This will be followed by an overview of findings from the survey of county school systems. An analysis of implications for rural educators will conclude this paper. Additional

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activities of the Task Force are not included due to space limitations, although one of these activites is featured in a companion paper entitled "Youth-at-Risk and 4-H.... Partners in Success".

Building Partnerships Towards Dropout Prevention

Current research literature suggests that there are a multitude of factors that can place a student at risk of not completing school,including:

- Poor academic achievement
- Poor reading skills
- Dislike of school
- Disciplinary problems
- High absenteeism
- Grade retention
- Poor self-concept
- Limited participation in extracurricular activities
- Physical, emotional and/or family-related problems
- Low socioeconomic family status
- Low educational attainment of parents

Although many of these factors relate directly to a student's performance and behavior in school, some of the factors are clearly outside of a school system's control. Therefore, prevention and intervention strategies that are based exclusively on the use of school resources are inherently limited and can be only partially successful. Thus, the base of those responsible for dropout prevention must be broadened to include parents; community groups and organizations; businesses and industry; and health, mental-health, and social service agencies. Each of these groups can make a unique contribution to reducing school dropouts. The challenge is to build the type of partnerships that will maximize the contribution of these resources.

Seeking to make dropout prevention a community responsibility, the School Dropout Prevention Task Force of West Virginia University is proposing the establishment of similar task forces at the community level. Community task forces, in turn, will provide a framework for building the types of partnerships that will accommodate a comprehensive, community-wide approach to dropout prevention. The intent is to build the type of programs and procedures that will permit school officials to systematically invelve both parents and community resources in prevention and intervention strategies - strategies that are tailored to meet the individual needs of at-risk students.

In advancement of the creation of these community-based task forces, the WVU Task Force is planning to sponsor a state-wide conference to be held during the Fall of 1990. This conference will seek to establish sufficient interest in the school dropout problem to prompt the establishment of local task forces and to provide these task forces with sufficient guidance and direction to get them started. Thus the intended audience for this conference will include school and community representatives from throughout the state.

A video tape is being developed dramatizing the scope and nature of the dropout problem and potential solutions. Additionally, a resource guide is being developed outlining the range of strategies available for dropout prevention and intervention. As previously indicated, a select group of exemplary programs will be featured in this guide.

While the make-up of local task forces is likely to vary from community to community, it is anticipated that the following key partners will be involved.

County Extension Agents As a follow-up to the conference, county extension agents will assume a lead role in organizing community task forces. Extension agents live in and are a part of the communities they serve, thus enhancing their effectiveness in working with local groups and organizations. Extension has a particularly strong tradition of working with public school systems since they share a common mission of youth development. In fact the Extension 4-H program represents a potential viable resource in addressing the school dropout problem (see the accompanying paper "Youth-at-Risk and 4-H.... Partners in Success").

An initial task of the Extension agents will be to secure the support and participation of the other key partners. This will involve both formal and informal meetings with the Board of Education and School Superintendent as well as representatives from other key community organizations and agencies. Extension agents will convene the initial meeting of the task force and will help to establish an organizational structure and agenda. Subsequently, the agents will assure an on-going, facilitating role in support of task force planning and program development.

School Officials To be successful, a community task force must first receive the endorsement and support of the local Board of Education and School Superintendent--support that is translated into a commitment to make the school system a lead partner in this new initiative. As a part of this commitment, procedures for the systematic and early identification of potential dropouts must be established, followed by the development of an intervention strategy. School officials can then secure the involvement of parents and other community resources, as appropriate, in accordance with procedures developed by the task force.

Parents Efforts to systematically and programmatically involve parents in dropout prevention strategies have been extremely limited. The conventional wisdom is that parental attention, motivation, and influence declines as their children become older, thus diminishing parents' capacity to impact their child's educational future. On the other hand, some noteworthy examples of successful programs demonstrate that parents can have a decisive role in keeping dropout-prone students in school. The key is to involve parents as allies in dropout prevention and intervention strategies. Several measures can be undertaken to involve parents and to enhance their effectiveness, including individual and group counseling, parenting education workshops, home visitation, and frequent communication.

Community Agencies Schools have limited resources to address the many physical, emotional, and family-related problems that can place a student at risk of not completing school. Some of the more serious risk factors include drug addiction, teen pregnancy, homelessness, domestic violence, and truancy. In such cases, procedures should be established for the systematic involvement of the most appropriate community agency. This might include health, mental health, social service, and law enforcement agencies. Representatives from each of these agencies should be members of the task force.

Other Community Organizations Within every community, there are a number of organizations capable of addressing the needs of troubled youth. These might include Big Brother and Big Sister Programs, church-related groups, athletic clubs, and 4-H and other youth groups. Local task forces should seek to involve these organizations as community resources in dropout prevention programming.

Business and Industry In recent years, significant progress has been made in building partnerships between public schools and local businesses and industries. The concept of such partnerships has some significant implications for dropout prevention programming. Community task forces should seek creative ways to involve local businesses and industries as an additional resource to help keep students in school. This might include field trips and career awareness programs, mentoring programs, and providing opportunities for work experience and on-the-job training.

In summary, the establishment of community task forces is viewed as a very ambitious undertaking, yet it also represents one of the most promising opportunities for the university to address the dropout problem on a statewide basis. Making this new initiative feasible is the grass-roots network of county extension offices, which extends the university into virtually every community in the state. Using their community development skills and a long-standing relationship with their respective school systems, extension agents can pull together the resources necessary to bring about the establishment of these task forces. Community task forces, in turn, will provide a framework for building the types of partnerships that will accommodate a comprehensive, community-wide approach to dropout prevention.

Dropout Prevention Programs in West Virginia County School Systems
-Results of a 1989 Survey-

The data presented is based on survey responses of 45 of West Virginia's 55 county school systems, which represents an 81 percent response rate. Superintendents identified the most appropriate person in their county to respond to a mailed survey. Additionally, the respondents, as requested, sent written documents related to dropout prevention policies, plans, and procedures within their county school system.

Organization of Dropout Prevention Programs

Survey results indicate that the organization of dropout prevention programs within county school systems varies considerably. In some counties, the school board simply adopted a dropout prevention policy and then delegated to the principals the responsibility for carrying it out. In other counties, overall planning, coordination, and monitoring of dropout prevention activities occurs at the county level. Attendance Directors were identified most frequently as having county-wide dropout prevention responsibilities, followed by Social Service Directors, Guidance and Counseling Directors, and JTPA Coordinators. The coordination and monitoring of dropout prevention programs was the most prevalent responsibility of this person, followed by data collection and reporting, coordinating counseling services, and direct counseling with students and parents. Seventy-eight percent of the counties had developed a dropout prevention policy, while sixty-five percent had developed a plan for dropout prevention.

The Scope & Nature of Dropout Prevention Programs

Based upon an analysis of the dropout prevention literature, 13 specific measures were identified that collectively represent a comprehensive dropout prevention program, which included:

(1) Systematic identification of potential dropouts
(2) Referral to a counselor and/or Student Based Assistance Team (SBAT) for assessment
(3) Development of an intervention plan
(4) Personal counseling
(5) Seeking of parent involvement
(6) Remedial instruction
(7) Systematic monitoring of student progress
(8) Encouragement of extracurricular involvement
(9) Referral to Social Services (if indicated)
(10) Alternative Learning Program (secondary schools)
(11) Summer School program (high schools)
(12) Staff development (county level)
(13) Involvement of community (county level)

Respondents were asked to evaluate to what extent the first eleven of these measures were being routinely and systematically undertaken within their elementary schools, middle/jr. high schools, and high schools. Summarized below is the percent of counties reporting a county-wide application of these measures (by level).

Measurers	Elementary Schools	Middle/Jr. High Schools	High Schools
• Systematic Identification	56%	65%	78%
• Referral to Counselor/SBAT	62%	87%	91%
• Develop Intervention Plan	27%	40%	56%
• Personal Counselling	49%	78%	82%
• Monitor Student Progress	60%	69%	82%
• Social Service Referral	51%	65%	82%
• Parent Involvement	47%	62%	60%
• Remedial Instruction	42%	47%	44%
• Extracurricular Involvement	33%	47%	47%
• Alternative Learning Program	---	44%	56%
• Summer School	---	---	33%

The data clearly indicates that dropout prevention programming increases with the level of schooling, suggesting that perhaps the greatest need is for expanded programming at the elementary level to insure earlier intervention. Opportunities for parent involvement need to be increased along with remedial instruction and extracurricular involvement.

Additionally, the respondents were asked to describe the scope and nature of any staff development activities (such as in-service training) related to dropout prevention. Forty-four percent of the counties reported having conducted teacher in-service programs, plus an additional 16 percent reported similar staff development for counselors and 4 percent for

principals. No staff development activities related specifically to dropout prevention were reported in 42 percent of the counties. The data supports the conclusion that increased emphasis needs to placed on staff development if schools systems are to enhance the effectiveness of their dropout prevention programming

Finally, the respondents were asked to describe the scope and nature of dropout prevention activities (if any) by groups and organization outside their school system but within their county. The results are summarized as follows:

Organization	% Counties
None reported	47
Social Service Agency	11
Extension/4-H	11
Health/Mental Health Agencies	9
Businesses/Industries	9
Law enforcement/Courts	7
Fraternal Organizations	4
Community Organizations	4
Other Organizations	9

It is clear from this data that school systems do not systematically involve community groups and organizations in their dropout prevention programming - at least not in any comprehensive fashion. This represents a lost opportunities to broaden the base of participants addressing the issue of school dropouts.

Program Effectiveness

Each of the respondents were asked to assess the effectiveness of dropout prevention programs in their county in terms of actually reducing the number of dropouts. Their responses, as summarized below, indicates that their is a perception of needed improvement:

Very effective	20%	Somewhat effective	47%
Effective	24%	Not effective	9%

Assessment of Needs

The respondents were asked to identify a new or expanded measure that could have the greatest impact on improving the dropout situation in their county. Mentioned most frequently, by 23 percent of he respondents, was the need for additional counselors, particularly at the elementary level. Alternative education programs or schools were identified by 20 percent of the respondents along with improving teachers effectiveness in working with "at-risk" students. Increased parent and community involvement were separately identified by 10 percent of the respondents along with improved curriculum and course offerings to enhance student interest in school. Nine percent identified additional funding, and 7 percent singled out earlier identification and intervention; parent education; and increased extracurricular activities.

Exemplary Programs

Finally, respondents were asked to identify any exemplary programs related to dropout prevention in any of their schools. This resulted in the identification of 43 separate programs from which the research investigators are currently collecting additional information. The intent is to incorporate these exemplary programs into a resource guide that will be available from the School Dropout Prevention Task Force upon its completion.

Implications for Rural Educators

Although the West Virginia University School Dropout Prevention Task Force is young, the year and a half of its existence has demonstrated the viability of land grant initiative when grappling with the difficulties of school dropout prevention in this predominantly rural state.

1) Concern about dropout prevention is high among all groups involved in this endeavor. This has resulted in high participation levels from all members of the task force and strong support from the groups they represent. This concern suggests a community-wide interest that is waiting to be tapped. A broad range of community members are willing to become part of efforts to work on dropout prevention when asked to participate.

2) The school curriculum needs to be addressed in ways that connect its limited resources with community resources that can help students see the relationship between in-school and out of school activities. Exemplary dropout prevention programs frequently demonstrate a direct connection between school skills and life skills.

3) Ways for all rural youth to have access to extracurricular activities need to be considered. The isolation and alienation so frequently described by at-risk students are a special concern in rural areas. The financial expenditure to provide transportation and a wide range of activities for students to explore and find connections has tremendous potential for long-range economic pay-off as more students are able to see school as related to their lives and interests.

4) Parallel programs for educating adults need to be established. Parents and teachers alike need to be more informed about how to identify potential dropouts and how to forestall their isolation and alienation. This needs to occur early in the schooling process, at least by the third or fourth grade.

5) Collaboration works! When representatives from a variety of groups come together (Extension, College of Education, State Department of Education), an invaluable process begins of awareness, communication and understanding of each others' perspectives and concerns. As people begin to talk to each other about their appreciation for the complexity of the problem of dropout prevention and the diversity of potential solutions, this strengthens each representative in their own group, as well as a member of the task force.